

Librarians and the growth of inequality: librarians reaction to the Levett - Braithwaite article

In the April 1975 issue of New Zealand libraries there was published a paper "The growth of knowledge and inequality in New Zealand society" by Allan Levett, senior lecturer in sociology, Victoria University of Wellington, and Eric Braithwaite, senior lecturer in education, University of Auckland. On the basis of statistical analysis they argued that there are increasing inequalities in New Zealand society, and that librarians are contributing in part to the growth of these inequalities by uncritically responding to the market-place demands of sophisticated technology and educated elites. In the authors' view it is necessary that librarians acknowledge an "equality" imperative in their policy decision-making. They also offer several suggestions as to how the profession could correct these trends.

Several librarians were invited to comment on the article and the first of these comments are published below. Further comments have been invited for the August issue, when it is intended that Levett and Braithwaite should reply. It is hoped that readers will debate in this journal the fundamental issues raised.—Hon. Ed.

D. C. McIntosh, Chairman, and W. J. McEldowney, Deputy Chairman, New Zealand Library Resources Committee, jointly comment:

The editor's invitation to comment on the above article is appreciated and we respond on behalf of the New Zealand Library Resources Committee with a joint reply on some points raised.

The authors of the paper under discussion have rightly drawn attention to the need for co-ordinated policy decision-making in the development of the nation's library resources and to the points made in the McEldowney report. However, it is possible, by taking sections of that report out of context, to be unfair to those who developed the tradition of co-operative effort which has for many years been a feature of library development in New Zealand. It is also necessary

to distinguish between the problems that have to be dealt with in co-ordinating the growth of scholarly and specialised collections, and those connected with the fair distribution of library resources, of high quality but not specialised or esoteric, among the community as a whole. The two sets of problems overlap to a certain extent, but the distinction between them needs to be kept in mind.

The New Zealand Library Association, through its Book Resources Committee established in the 1940s, presided over the development of a system of library co-operation which in its day had few peers and still enables readers throughout the country to gain access to the nation's library resources. Central records of holdings maintained in the then National Library Service and a simple and liberal system of inter-library loans were, and still are, the basis of a library service which has many merits. The situation that McEldowney drew attention to was in the first place, that administrative changes in the library system had not perhaps been matched by changes in the co-ordinating machinery, and in the second place, that the development of much more specialised collections required a new approach to the question of co-ordination. It was a question of the growth of a living organism, rather than creating something where nothing existed.

Since the McEldowney report was published, the Trustees of the National Library have taken some important steps. The Trustees' Resources Committee has been reconstituted as the New Zealand Library Resources Committee, with representatives from various library groups and with wide-ranging responsibilities. It has begun to examine various aspects of library co-operation, the development of significant collections, and the various methods of disseminating information, and should have considerable influence in the future.

These, however, may be criticised as activities which tend to increase still further the imbalance between the resources that are available to the highly educated and those that affect the ordinary citizen. We would not agree with such a criticism.

The authors' treatment of the question of the fair distribution of library resources among the community as a whole appears to take insufficient account of the extensive and even coverage provided for more than 30 years by the Country Library Service and the School Library Service. In saying that we do not overlook the fact of state assistance to metropolitan areas not always matching that provided to other parts of the country. For the year ended 31 March 1975 the Country Library Service supplied 1096 public and community libraries, many in small rural districts, and institutions with loan collections the size of which has always been based on the population of the area concerned. The present scale of assistance is set out in the Country Library Service *Guide for Public Libraries*, 1970. In addition books are loaned on request to meet the needs of individual readers. Similar provision is made by the School Library Service for schools, and exchanges of books for primary and intermediate schools are based on rolls for standard one and upwards. For both primary

and secondary schools there is free access to an information and request service to meet individual requirements. In the year just ended 2,884 schools received School Library Service assistance. That these extensive services are based on population or on school roll, as the case may be, would seem to negate in part at least the assertion of a "continued lack of central concern for the equality implications of libraries' policy".

The deployment of these resources by local community institutions is in the nature of things likely to be uneven but Otara is a case in point where strenuous efforts are being made to attract to the library those who for one reason or another have not known about or availed themselves of books and journals so freely available.

Time and space preclude a fuller reply but one wonders whether the authors' preoccupation with the affluent should not much more be concerned with the more educated whose training in the use of books and vocational need for books will be a factor contributing to a greater use of libraries in the samples quoted. The authors may wish to study too the influence of book-oriented teachers, and professional school librarians if employed, on the reading habits of pupils and their use of library facilities in later life.

For its part, the New Zealand Library Resources Committee would wish to encourage the debate now initiated and to look constructively at proposals which could lead to a more even spread of the services and resources available.

W. J. McEldowney, University Librarian, University of Otago, also comments:

I find it difficult to comment on a paper which uses concepts which I find quite foreign, without being unfair to it and to its authors. Their main point, which I take to be the need to improve library services to the disadvantaged sections of society, is a valid one—more than that, it is urgently in need of attention. But I do not think that the aim is to be achieved by inducing feelings of guilt in the minds of those who serve the educated elite or the rich or whatever other groups are currently out of favour, or by failing to differentiate between the quite different needs of different groups in the community.

Perhaps I should take up the question of the educated elite first, since it is this group which I am paid to serve. What is wrong with an educated elite, anyway, so long as it does not become exclusive and selfish? Surely the quality of life in any community depends to a large extent on those who have gained some understanding of the forces that mould society and can help to continue the great cultural traditions. Not everyone is cut out for this kind of role, and not everyone would wish to play it, but for those who do, extensive library resources are tools that they use. We need to remember the division in the fifties between those who denounced New Zealand as an intellectual desert and fled into exile (they still write letters to the

New Statesman and other papers), and those who decided to try to make New Zealand a country fit for people to live in. Perhaps the decision was not a conscious one, but it is the second group who have lived worthwhile lives. They are not all necessarily rich, nor are all the owners of power boats of their number. But one thing is necessary to them, and that is a good and extensive library service.

For those whose work rests on a foundation built entirely or largely of books, the collections need to be very large indeed, and this is one of the main points made in my Report on university library resources to which the authors of the paper refer so kindly. But this does not necessarily mean that those people are gaining an unfair advantage. Two examples could perhaps illustrate my point. The agricultural research worker, for instance, needs to have access to many books and journals. His work needs to be transmitted to farmers and others in the community, but this is not done by transmitting copies of all those publications by tele-facsimile to every farmhouse in the country. It is done by means of bulletins, field days, radio programmes, advisory services, and the like. My second example is that of the university music department which has an active programme of taking music to the people. A large collection of music scores, books, and journals is life and blood to the staff of the department, without whom the programme would never materialise, but it is only marginally or distantly important to those many people who enjoy the music.

The point I am making is that it is a fallacy to argue from figures of book holdings, without being clearly aware of the nature of the holdings and the use to which they are, or can be put. Some sections of the paper invoked pictures of welfare officers setting out to put a copy of the *Zeitschrift für Parasitenkunde* in every home, or of an eager librarian standing on a street corner and saying "Psst! Want to use an archive?" to passers by. If an industry uses large quantities of electricity, this does not necessarily mean that it has an unfair advantage over domestic consumers (though I approach a touchy subject here). Similarly, a large library collection does not necessarily give its users an unfair advantage. It is often the means whereby they in turn serve the community.

If we accept the idea that large collections, made up in part of very specialised material, and people who use them, are of some value to the community, and refrain from pillorying them or mounting a pogrom, what is left? A good deal, I think, and a lot more work needs to be done to sort out the problems. There are many people in the community who need library services. Who and where are these people? What are their needs? It is not necessarily access to more of what exists at present that they should have, but possibly a different kind of service, based on different types of collections. Mr Cauchi's work in Manukau leads that way, but we need more Cauchis and they need more support.

Who should take the responsibility? The authors simplify, I think,

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when they imply that librarians have it in their power to make the necessary changes. Perhaps they do, to some extent, but much of what they would like to do depends on their convincing other people, such as the contractor who becomes a local councillor because of his interest in housing subdivisions, that library service, of an unconventional kind, to labourers and layoffs is an essential community aim. All librarians, like others, tend to like to be appreciated and to earn salaries on which they can raise families.

Much more could be said by others who are more clearly concerned with the authors' preoccupations than I am. They have uncovered the first layer of an important problem. In doing so, they have given the impression that, in the interest of equality, they would roll out the peaks that dominate and give a special character to the landscape, when what is needed is to drain the swamps and make them productive.

S. J. Cauchi, City Librarian, Manukau City, comments:

Having no head for figures I am unable to comment intelligently on the tables. However, perhaps this does not matter too much. The article is not what it seems; not, that is to say, a dispassionate, precise, scientific paper. Rather it is a contribution to political discussion and like most contributions to political (or library) literature it is tendentious. I think its tendency is a good one, on the whole, but in these brief remarks I shall confine myself to expressing some doubts.

The authors' introduction, with its opposition between a "technological imperative" and an "equality imperative", begs a good many questions. It is suggested that public bodies like libraries should be especially concerned about the "equality implications" of their policies, in order to counteract the evils of a capitalist economy. Yet there is virtue in inequality as well as equality, in diversity as well as unity, in private property as well as common property: and libraries especially, unlike so many other media, can serve people individually—within limits. They can also serve people—or learn to serve people—collectively, with lectures, concerts, exhibitions, and so on: but the idea of individual service is a precious one because each individual is unique. One can want to see more individuals—more diversity—in the New Zealand scene without necessarily wanting the filthy rich to become even richer or the downtrodden poor to be even more downtrodden.

The authors argue that librarians should become activists, consciously pursuing an egalitarian objective and planning our policies accordingly, with a master plan at the centre. Those of us who have qualms about such a proposal are reassured that we are already agents for social change anyway, willy-nilly, but unthinking ones. This is like saying that because we all behave basically like Skinnerian rats, then it is all right to manipulate one another according to Skinnerian principles. I don't believe it, and I have a liberal's healthy preference for King Log rather than King Stork. I hope there will always be room in the library world, and in New Zealand generally,

for mavericks who do unexpected things and challenge the conventional wisdom.

Librarians are often accused—quite rightly—of taking too narrow a view of their duties. It is said that we are too book-minded, or too print-minded, or too set in our ways. I think this is the basic trouble with the article, too. Libraries, on their own, are not a very suitable object for study if one is looking for egalitarianism. You need to look at the whole field of education, or recreation, or communication, or whatever. Some people like reading, some don't. Does it matter so very much that the people in Pakuranga borrow twice as many books as the people in Otara? Are they really gaining economic advantage from the books they read? One presumes that the children are, but are the adults? The people in Otara may very well have better things to do with their time—by their lights. However, one obvious conclusion to be drawn from this study (as from others) is that the library in Otara—or in any similar area—should become something more than a traditional suburban public library with lending service, quick reference collection, story-hours, and the rest. Just what it should become is harder to work out. I hope to report on this matter in due time—say, in about five years.

The "specific delight" of library service is that it offers variety and choice from a *collection*. Not only of printed materials, but much else. And the collection should not be merely static, or run on super-market self-service lines. Public libraries in New Zealand need new blood; they need imaginative show-business; we need to transform them for our populace in rather the same way as Roy Strong transformed the National Portrait Gallery in London, and brought it alive for a very different populace.

I understand that at Hillary College, in Otara, hardly any poetry earlier than, say, Wilfred Owen is taught to the pupils. What are the implications of this fact for the policies of Otara Public Library? Should we follow suit, and throw out the *Literature* section? Or should we attempt to redress the balance, knowing that the books will be used only by an educated elite (which doesn't mean to say the elite is any better off than the others)? I think the Eurocentric culture—those "few thousand battered books", the records of a "botched civilisation"—worth preserving here as elsewhere, and only preservable if the tradition is passed on to the younger generation, somehow or other. Even Polynesians write English, some of them very well.